



Hi! My name is Tierra Reay, and I spent my Global Health Placement in Whitehorse, Yukon, Canada from September to December 2019.

August 28<sup>th</sup>, 2019. My stomach was clenched the entire way to the airport. I was about to leave my family and friends for three months to embark on a journey to learn about nursing in Northern Canada. I'll be honest, this experience was my first time living away from home (let alone across the country!), so when I first got to my residence in Whitehorse, I was very overwhelmed. I was questioning everything and wondering how I was going to handle being alone in Yukon for three months. After unpacking and taking some deep breaths, I took a walk down to the river and saw the mountains in the distance, and something about it made me feel calmer. I came to realize being around nature and the mountains Yukon had to offer became an important part of self care and coping with isolation.

When I first told my friends and family about my Global Health placement, most

of the responses I got were: "*Why Yukon?*" I've always wondered what Canada's North is like, and how the Canadian healthcare system is delivered in the territories compared to urban Southwestern Ontario. I also wanted the opportunity to learn about Indigenous cultures in Canada first-hand.

I was placed in Whitehorse General Hospital (WGH) on the Surgical Inpatient unit. The typical patient to nurse ratio was 5:1, with three RNs on the unit with a float RN at times. Interestingly, the supplies used on the unit were similar to what I have used in clinical experiences before, although there were still some marked differences with the resources in Whitehorse. Specialists from outside the territory would rotate and spend a set amount of time at the hospital to see referred patients, making visits as much as multiple times per year, or even as little as once a year. Patients diagnosed with cancer needed to have a Medevac all the way to Vancouver to see an oncologist and be sent back to Whitehorse with a treatment plan. WGH could provide chemotherapy treatment, however if the patient needed radiation they would need to stay in Vancouver since WGH could not support that treatment. It amazed me that patients needed to travel so far away to have access to the nearest oncologist, and how huge Canada really is as a country!

I was able to spend a few hours with Yukon Community Health at Whitehorse Emergency Shelter. Every Wednesday an outreach clinic is held at the shelter, which aims to have one to two RNs, a

physiotherapist, and a social worker present to address individuals' needs. There was also a social liaison from the Kwanlin Health Centre that would make sandwiches for those who would come to the clinic. The experience at the shelter was very emotionally challenging, yet also rewarding. Some First Nations individuals that came to the clinic told me their stories about facing discrimination and stereotyping because they identify as Indigenous. One individual told me about their experience with intergenerational trauma and substance abuse. Another told me about being a victim of the Sixties Scoop. Another told me about having epilepsy and being stereotyped as withdrawing from alcohol. These stories were heartbreaking to hear, and also made me feel so frustrated and angry that these people, their families, and their communities face this type of discrimination, and other systemic barriers that contribute to their health status. Reflecting on this experience afterwards, I felt empowered to find out more information about getting involved with political/advocacy initiatives for vulnerable populations.



During my free time, I explored as many trails and areas as I could to capture the true beauty Yukon has to offer. I was also very fortunate to see the Northern Lights, which was an experience I can't even describe in words! I also spent some time at the Kwanlin Dun Cultural Centre, where I learned a lot of information about First Nations culture and history. The centre even had self guided tours available to learn about the importance about preserving First Nations' languages, as many seem to be "dying out" as Elders and interpreters pass away. Getting a glimpse of what preserving language means to First Nations culture was one example of my journey of realizing the importance of acknowledging cultural safety. I've seen Indigenous patients and their families come into the hospital and not trusting the healthcare staff or the healthcare system. Sometimes it would be difficult to communicate and build a therapeutic relationship with these patients, even after performing self reflection and altering my body language and communication skills to become more culturally sensitive. I've learned addressing the power imbalance

between staff and patient is a vital part of cultural safety and the beginning to build trust with Indigenous patients and their families.

Spending my Global Health placement in Whitehorse, Yukon was an experience I will never forget. It was a personal journey that has shaped my current and future self and how I will practice nursing. Now when people ask me, “*Why Yukon?*”, my response is, “*Why NOT Yukon?*”



